



READING GUIDE

TOKYO GIRL BRIAN HARVEY

Reading level: 5.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, mystery,
male sleuth, accidental sleuth,
Tokyo, Japan, piano teacher, jazz pianist,
tsunami, Japanese mob, crime boss

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Summary

Tokyo Girl starts with pianist Frank Ryan having moved to Japan in the wake of a brush with crime back in his hometown of Nanaimo, British Columbia. He has moved to Tokyo to work as a piano teacher and spends his days tutoring Japanese homemakers in classical music. He feels reasonably certain that, in a country of 127 million, he is unlikely to run into anyone from his past life—including his previous employer-turned-traitor, Kaz Nakamura.

Japan is a striking contrast to Canada. The people are distant and polite to a fault; food is fresh and available at every street corner and at every price point; the city is thronging with crowds, cars and trains. Through it all runs the oppressive heat and fear as Japan scrambles to right itself after the 2011 tsunami knocked out its nuclear reactors and set them to leaking.

Frank earns a decent living, but it's not royalty. One of his students is the attractive, complicated, surgically Westernized Akiko, who lives in a palace yet whose face and body often show evidence of physical brutality. Akiko appears to live with—or under—Goto, a tall, stylish man with a thick reptile-skin briefcase and a sulking countenance. Akiko tells Frank that Goto is her father. Frank suspects otherwise.

Goto informs Frank that the piano teacher now has another job: playing jazz in one of Goto's bars in Kichijoji. Frank agrees—not that he has any choice in the matter. Now Frank plays five nights a week at the Tom and Mary Jazz Lounge near Inokashira Park, earning upwards of five hundred dollars a night in tips, much of it from Goto and his stony-faced friends.

But on Wednesday nights Frank doesn't play. Instead, after Akiko's lesson he takes the train back home. He becomes obsessed with a quiet, simply dressed woman who radiates a natural kind of beauty, who takes the same train home every Wednesday. One day, she shares with Frank an opinion from the newspaper that she's reading, startling Frank with her outspokenness. The following week, she asks him to attend a public protest against the Toyko Electric Power Company, which is handling cleanup of the radioactive disaster in Fukushima. The woman is convinced



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TEPCO is hiding a less palatable truth from the public. In return for her invitation, Frank invites her to the Tom and Mary Lounge.

The woman's name is Momo. The night she shows up at the lounge she leaves before Frank can say hello, but not before he notices her staring at Goto with pure hatred. Frank finds her outside the lounge later, waiting. Momo informs him that Goto is part of the yakuza, the Japanese mob, which is responsible for sweeping up many of the city's homeless men—one of whom is her younger brother—and sending them off to clean up the toxic mess in Fukushima. Momo kisses Frank briefly, thanking him for listening to her story, and warns him that as Goto's employee, he is now bound to the mobster.

When Frank arrives at his next lesson with Akiko, a chisel-faced man that he recognizes as one of Goto's friends is just leaving. Akiko definitely seems to have been beaten recently, however she refuses to talk about it. Frank decides to try and extricate himself from her complicated, mob-riddled world and focus instead on the brighter road that Momo represents. That night on the train, Momo hands Frank a note. Worried that it's bad news, he takes it to a ramen shop and reads it over his supper. He is surprised when Momo suggests they meet at hotel Fifteen Love next Sunday night.

Sunday arrives and Frank is astonished when Momo shepherds him into one of Japan's love hotels for a couple hours of wild sex. Afterward, they go for dinner and Momo asks him a favor: to try to lay eyes on Goto's account book, which contains information that Momo says will help her find her brother. Frank agrees. The only problem is the account book resides inside the briefcase that Goto never puts down.

When he returns home, Frank discovers one of Akiko's prized koi slaughtered and laid out in his bed. He recognizes the warning but doesn't understand why he's a target. At Akiko's on Wednesday, he discovers a new, identical fish in her pond, and another round of beatings on her face. He looks for a way to glimpse Momo's mysterious account book, but finds no opportunity. He doesn't push his luck: Goto is involved in bars, human trafficking, possibly prostitution and his own chain of love hotels.

The next Sunday, they return to the Fifteen Love. Afterward, Frank confesses that he can't get hold of the briefcase to look at the account book. Momo suggests that perhaps he simply try to touch the bag—and watch Goto's face while he does. He doesn't get the chance for that, either. Instead, one afternoon Goto puzzlingly gives Frank an envelope stuffed full of money.

The following Wednesday, Frank discreetly follows Momo off the train. When she heads to a playground to pick up a young child that looks very much like Goto Jr., Frank realizes he's been duped: Momo is one of Goto's ex-mistresses, and she has been using him to extract essential financial information from the father of her child.

Frank decides to quit his job at the lounge and just go back to teaching. When he arrives at Akiko's house, she informs him that he is a fool for not recognizing that there would be payment expected for his relations with Momo, just like Akiko herself has to pay for the "privilege" of being Goto's mistress. Frank is whisked away in a black Mercedes by the chisel-faced man.

Chisel Face takes Frank to Tsukiji, the famous Tokyo fish market. It's mid-evening, so the place is empty. Chisel Face leads Frank through a maze of hallways and kiosks to a small room with a locked door. Eventually, Goto shows up with none other than Frank's old friend and employer, and more recent nemesis, Kaz Nakamura. Kaz informs Frank that he is being punished for sleeping with another man's mistress; Goto owns the Fifteen Love and so knew of Frank's presence there with Momo.



Kaz is also the man who has been selected to chop off one of Frank's fingers with a nata, effectively rendering him unable to ever play the piano again. Goto and Chisel Face watch dispassionately from the sidelines. Akiko cries. The deed is done, and the group departs, leaving Frank to stumble out on his own.

In actuality, though, Kaz spared his old friend by faking the cut: instead of using a real nata, Kaz instead used a movie-set nata with a retractable blade. All Frank receives is a cut on the knuckle.

Frank packs his stuff, takes the plane ticket Goto has furnished him with, and heads for Canada.

Questions for Discussion

1. A Japanese proverb kicks off *Tokyo Girl*. What is the meaning of this proverb? How is it specific to the culture from which it arises, and how might a similar North American proverb compare?
2. A simile is a literary device that adds description by comparing two things, usually using the words *like* or *as*. Here's an example from the first page of *Tokyo Girl*, where Frank Ryan watches as his student, Mrs. Ogawa, *made a quick ducking motion, as though someone had zinged a baseball at her head*. Further on in the story, Frank observes another foreigner on the train as he clings to the metal handgrip on the train *as though he was afraid of being washed away*. How do similes add to the reader's experience of a passage? Find other examples from the book.
3. In the chapter where we meet Akiko, Frank Ryan describes Tokyo in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami using strong verbs that paint a clear picture for the reader:

I arrived at the end of March. It was just two weeks after an earthquake under the Pacific Ocean had driven a thirty-foot wall of water—a tsunami—through the coastal city of Fukushima. The tidal wave hurdled a seawall. It tossed freighters and ferries ashore like bathtub toys and left buses on hospital roofs.

Pick out the verbs that give this passage so much life and detail. Look for other examples of strong verbs in *Tokyo Girl*. Try substituting less colorful verbs, or verbs that change the image slightly. How are we able to manipulate a piece of writing just by changing the verbs?

4. Frank Ryan is able to travel the world because of his piano-playing skills. What skills or abilities do you possess that could possibly afford you a similar freedom?
5. Skim back through the story to find places where the author used foreshadowing to hint at what's to come.
6. At what point in the story did you sense Frank Ryan was headed for trouble?
7. Go through *Tokyo Girl* and make a list of all the references to life in Japan that arise through Ryan's narration. Which of them are facts? Which of them are nuances? Which are stereotypes?
8. In the chapter called "The Fukushima Fifty," Momo tells Ryan that, like her brother, Ryan would not be able to quit his job. He now belongs to Goto. What other stories have you watched, read or listened to where a central character becomes trapped in a similar way?
9. Frank Ryan is awoken by an earthquake early one morning. *If you think you've got everything figured out*, he reflects, *think again*. Talk about nature's power. How does the earth's routine systems and functioning rearrange our sense of importance?





10. As he researches Goto on the Internet, Frank Ryan muses that deception is a survival skill in Japan. What is the value in this? What is the value in the more open style of communication favored in North America?
11. As you have come to understand him, do you think Frank Ryan is a passive person, i.e. allowing life to take him where it will; or a proactive person, i.e. making clear decisions and choosing actions that take him closer toward what he wants in life? Explain, using evidence from *Tokyo Girl* to support your opinion.
12. Why do women sometimes make the trade of being treated badly so they can have a relationship that provides them with money?
13. How is food culture different between Japan and North America? Find examples from the book that support your thinking.
14. As you see it, is Goto jealous of Frank? Or is he simply asserting his power and authority over the people in his life?
15. Can you think of a different title for this story?

